

# *A Tribute to Jia Lanpo (1908–2001)*



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BORN DURING THE TWILIGHT YEARS OF CHINA'S LAST IMPERIAL DYNASTY, Jia Lanpo was known nearly universally to his Chinese-speaking colleagues and students as Jia Lao, a referent of supreme respect that may be translated roughly as Elder Jia. In the traditional Chinese worldview—still very much central to the ways in which ethnic Chinese reckon social relationships, irrespective of their national origins—one accumulates wisdom and, consequently, reverence with advancing years. In middle age, Jia Lanpo had become a scholar and mentor of such universal respect that the more common age-based honorific, Lao Jia (Older Jia), and the equally formal, though less adulatory, forms of address—Jia Jiaoshou (Professor Jia) and Jia Laoshi (Teacher Jia)—were no longer often used in reference to this truly extraordinary man. By the beginning of his tenth decade, Jia Lanpo was lauded for his scholarly accomplishments and leadership qualities by scores of Chinese and foreign scientists alike (e.g., Clark 2002:261–263; Wei 1999; Wen 1999).

Assessing the significance of Jia Lanpo's scientific research in China and its impact on global paleoanthropology is no simple task. As Dennis Etler has so correctly observed in his definitive obituary, Jia Lanpo "... was an indefatigable worker and meticulous scholar, the author of hundreds of scientific and popular articles, treatises, and books detailing archaeological discoveries in China spanning over six decades" (Etler 2002:297).

Understanding Jia and his contributions requires contextualization on several historical and social levels. Many Western scholars assume that Chinese academics of Jia's generation labored solely under restrictive intellectual paradigms ranging from virtual foreign domination in the years prior to 1949 to hard-line Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought during and immediately after the repressive decade known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In spite of the fact that the bulk of Jia's scholarly career played out during an isolationist period, when China had very little officially sanctioned scientific interchange with the Western world, the earliest and latest phases of his life were conspicuously influenced by regular and fruitful collaboration with a wide range of non-Chinese and non-Communist Bloc colleagues.

Like scholars everywhere, Jia Lanpo was in measure a product of his intellectual milieu, especially that of his formative years. The Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology (IVPP), the smallest of the many diverse



Fig. 1. Jia Lanpo (1908–2001)

research organs of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, has been characterized throughout its long history by relatively intensive collaborative ties with non-Chinese intellectual traditions, even during the bleakest years of the Cultural Revolution. The progressive intellectual environment nurtured at the IVPP made it possible for Jia and many of his colleagues to foster and maintain contact with non-Communist Bloc foreign colleagues while other institutions' research activities were severely constrained or even curtailed completely. To be sure, many IVPP scientists paid a hefty price for their openness—during the Cultural Revolution the great vertebrate paleontologist of the Dinosauria and then IVPP Director, Yang Zhongjian (C. C. Young), was ridiculed by being forced to wear a dunce cap in public, surrounded by posters proclaiming that Teilhard de Chardin was his father! Nonetheless, the atmosphere of openness and intellectual cross-fertilization characteristic of the IVPP survived Red Guard hysteria to become inculcated in the generations of paleontologists and paleoanthropologists who succeeded the Cultural Revolution.

As China began tentatively to implement its Open Door Policy, in the late 1970s, it became known among the global scholarly community that Jia Lanpo had for decades been *soi-disant* conservator of the Zhoukoudian archives, a rich collection of original excavation notes, correspondence, and thousands of photographs and negatives. At substantial personal risk, over several decades Jia carefully curated a veritable treasure trove of information relating to paleoanthropology's formative period in China and beyond, much of which has formed the basis of our understanding of early work conducted at Zhoukoudian (Jia 1984, 1999; Jia and Huang 1984, 1990; Wang and Sun 2000).

I recall being entertained by Jia Lao and his charming wife, Mrs. Xia, one sultry summer afternoon in 1981 at their flat behind the IVPP in Beijing's western suburbs. I was at the time a newly minted Ph.D. on my first trip to China, very much in awe of the man and his extraordinary accomplishments. As he regaled me with tales—sometimes harrowing, sometimes hilarious—of his participation in excavations at Zhoukoudian in the 1930s, it occurred to me to press Jia for his perceptions of Chinese-foreign interactions during that period. I asked, "Jia

Lao, before your thirtieth birthday you had the opportunity to work on a daily basis with the likes of Teilhard, Licent, Bohlin, Weidenreich, and Black. What was that like? Did you have any input, as a Chinese scholar, into decisions regarding work at Zhoukoudian?” Jia chuckled, leaned across the small table, and said, “Xiao Ou [the diminutive form of my Sinicized surname], in the 1930s Pei [Pei Wenzhong or W. C. P’ei] and I were Professor Yang’s subordinates [Yang Zhongjian was more than a decade Jia’s senior; Pei was only four years older]. We didn’t make decisions about *anything*, but that wasn’t because *foreign* scientists insisted—we were just too junior, in the beginning, to have our opinions count.”

Jia’s response reminded me that Chinese scholars of his generation were players—often only pawns—in a complex socio-political game in which, to be sure, foreign powers and individual foreign researchers held certain advantageous pieces (Cormack 2000). An essential element of that game’s structure, though, was the lingering rigidity of the Chinese academic system itself, which unquestioningly equated age with experience, often to the extent of legitimizing age *over* experience. The effects of the May Fourth Movement, which manifested itself first in 1919 in the form of student protests against *both* foreign domination and the increasingly anachronistic Chinese imperial educational system, were still reverberating throughout Chinese academe as Jia Lanpo began to define himself as an intellectual in the late 1920s and 1930s. The movement’s watchword, “Show your proof!”, inspired scholars like Jia to adopt the positive aspects of a Western hypothetically based scientific paradigm, without yielding to either complete foreign intellectual domination or the paranoid rejection of all things non-Chinese. While in some quarters, decisions regarding the nature of Western influences in China were configured in the form of a dynamic—occasionally antagonistic—tension between East and West, at the IVPP long-standing institutional culture taught that not all foreign ideas were necessarily bad (e.g., Cormack 2000).

Jia valued and expanded his international collegial relationships until the very end. As China relaxed travel restrictions for its citizens in the 1980s as part of its rapprochement with the West, Jia reveled in the opportunity to visit the U.S. and Europe, nurturing old friendships and creating new ones.

In the mid-1980s, Jia Lanpo’s pivotal role in UNESCO’s evaluation of the *Homo erectus* locality at Zhoukoudian, as a potential World Heritage Site, afforded him the opportunity to expand his network of foreign colleagues, who were also called upon to render their opinion as to the global significance of Zhoukoudian Locality 1 (it was inscribed on UNESCO’s list in December 1987). One consequence of Jia’s interactions with UNESCO in the 1980s was his *de facto* redefinition as China’s senior paleoanthropologist, not merely an archaeologist or human paleontologist. The promotion of Zhoukoudian as a World Heritage Site coincided with the global scholarly community’s acknowledgment of Jia’s contributions to world paleoanthropology. More than a half-century after his participation in the discovery of some of the first *Homo erectus* materials at Zhoukoudian, Jia was recognized as a leader and innovator, not merely a follower or lackey.

For all his integrative abilities and diplomatic skills, Jia Lanpo was no stranger to intellectual controversy. His long-running debate with Pei Wenzhong regarding the earliest hominin occupation of China (e.g., Jia 1962; 1984:224–226), his unshakable conviction that Zhoukoudian Locality 1 contained irrefutable

evidence of Middle Pleistocene anthropogenic fire (e.g., Binford and Ho 1985; Binford and Stone 1986; Jia 1989), and his sometimes controversial interpretations of the antiquity and behavioral significance of sites such as Xihoudu, Lantian, Dingcun, and Xüjiayao all speak to the increasingly influential role played by Jia as gadfly during the latter half of his career. I passed on this observation to Jia in 1998, the last time that I saw him. He characteristically denied any conscious effort to stir the intellectual pot, demurring instead with the simple statement that, "I've had the good fortune of living in interesting intellectual times."

Jia Lanpo's professional life was defined by his effort to understand both the biological and cultural aspects of the human evolutionary trajectory as intertwined synergistic processes. Thus, he should be remembered first and foremost as a paleoanthropologist. Now, it might be claimed that the work of many scholars of Jia's generation, in China and elsewhere, mimicked an integrative paleoanthropological approach since, early on, the entire database was so small that every bone and every stone was a focal point in the reconstruction of past human behavior. While elements of that assertion are undoubtedly true, Jia Lanpo's contributions stand apart, given China's isolation from the global paleoanthropological community prior to the florescence of that field in the 1970s. Jia's synthetic approach to understanding the biological and cultural consequences of phenomena, ranging from paleoclimatic change to variability in the distribution of raw materials destined for the production of tools, is encapsulated in writings that can best be described as presciently integrative (e.g., Jia 1974; Jia and Wei 1982). In fact, the first glimmerings of a more broadly anthropological perspective may be detected in Jia's first professional publication (Jia 1933), penned at the age of 25, that consciously juxtaposes cultural and biological evidence of past human behavior. By the mid-1980s, *zonghe yanjiu* (interdisciplinary studies) had become part and parcel of the IVPP institutional approach to the study of human origins (e.g., Wu and Olsen 1985; Wu et al. 1985), due in no small part to the influence of Jia Lanpo. Ultimately, it was the adoption of a multidisciplinary approach to human evolutionary studies that tagged the IVPP's institutional culture and distinguished it from historically based mainstream archaeology in China.

In essence, in considering his broad contributions to paleoanthropology in China, Jia Lanpo should be remembered as a bridging phenomenon. "Bridging" because Jia's life and academic career spanned many successive, in some cases parallel, worlds: imperial, Republican, and post-Liberation; foreign and Chinese; Feudal and Socialist; student, worker, and intellectual, among others. "Phenomenon" because a lesser scholar might simply have cast his lot with a single combination of these powerful paradigmatic influences and heedlessly gotten on with his career. Not so Jia Lanpo. Jia had the ability to see beyond the historical perturbations of the revolutionary change and social upheaval that characterized much of twentieth-century China to remain focused on the core values of scientific inquiry: a sound research design capable of generating reliable, replicable data and sound interpretations as the basis for hypothesis formulation and testing.

Jia Lanpo was the "youngest" nonagenarian I've ever known. By word and deed, his was a long career exemplified by an open-minded, nurturing relationship with his junior colleagues and students, irrespective of national origin. With characteristic understatement, Wei Zhengyi (1999:25) captured the sentiment of

many when he summarized his interactions with the man by declaring, “Jia Lao, *wo jingyang nin* (Jia Lao, I admire you).” Jia Lao, I too admire you and will continue to do so for the rest of my days.

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